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SUBJECT: TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL ON MEDVEDEV'S LEGITIMACY

11. (SBU) Summary: Dismissing the March 2 presidential elections as preordained, Transparency International Director Yelena Panfilova nonetheless argued that the process accurately reflected Russia's political maturity and conferred the necessary legitimacy on First Deputy Prime Minister Medvedev. Panfilova painted a bleak picture of Russian civil society, hobbled by ambitions and in-fighting, which contributed to Russia's democratic immaturity. Placing 50/50 odds on Medvedev's performance as a liberal, Panfilova argued that anti-corruption efforts could be an early litmus test of the new president. End Summary

Presidential Elections Predetermined, but Prettier

12. (SBU) In a February 27 meeting, Transparency International Director Yelena Panfilova previewed her organization's press conference today, in which TI would highlight the loopholes in Russian legislation that facilitate the legal manipulation of elections. Panfilova said the "beauty" of the process was that there were very few machinations required by the Kremlin during the presidential campaign period, since the electoral legislation remained weighted in favor of the ruling party's candidate and the race had been shaped months before the actual polling. One of the most significant lacunae, she argued, was the provision allowing senior officials to remain in office while campaigning, which translated into their domination of the media and administrative resources.

13. (SBU) Technically, Panfilova predicted an "absolutely normal" presidential election on March 2, which would look legitimate and be seen as legitimate by the Russian electorate. She predicted up to 68 percent voter turnout, and said there would be less of the obvious voter intimidation or excesses that marked the December 2, 2007 Duma elections, with the caveat being in the North Caucasus republics. "The authorities learned from the parliamentary campaigns -- it was too obvious." Panfilova argued the OSCE was right to boycott the elections: "how do you report on a campaign that is not a campaign?"

Medvedev Passes Legitimacy Test

14. (SBU) Despite the choreography, Panfilova concluded that Medvedev would enjoy real legitimacy, conferred in a process that accurately reflected Russia's level of political maturity. Imagine Russia as a 17-year old teenager, she urged, who has grown bigger and taller (thanks to oil and gas wealth), but still wants to be liked by everyone, and has a hard time understanding why others get angry when its picks on the little kids (e.g. Estonia, Georgia) in the schoolyard. While a couple of thousand Russians followed TI's work closely, contributed to its campaigns, and embraced its principles, she noted that 140 million Russians remain largely indifferent. For the overwhelming majority of Russians, Panfilova argued, the presidential campaign was exactly what they wanted: the presentation of an acceptable replacement for Putin, packaged with the promise of stability. Russian society would evolve over time, she maintained, but it made no sense to measure it against the standards of a mature

democracy.

Civil Society Self-Defeating

15. (SBU) Panfilova argued that Medvedev's managed election should be viewed in the broader context of Russian civil society, which she judged was "disappointing" and as immature as Russia's electoral politics. When she helped found the All Russian Civic Congress in 2004, Panfilova said that she could not have predicted its demise in 2008 on the basis of political jealousy and in-fighting -- with Moscow Helsinki Group Director Lyudmila Alekseeva and Indem President Georgiy Satarov resigning over the continued presence of Other Russia's Garry Kasparov. Rather than fulfilling its mandate of providing alternatives to Putinism, the forum had degenerated into competing camps of NGO elites, more interested in attracting international grants and Russian media attention than in building grass-roots initiatives. "We did this to ourselves -- it wasn't the result of the security services or the Kremlin."

16. (SBU) There wasn't enough professionalism among NGO activists, Panfilova argued, with fewer members ready to undertake the hard work of mobilizing citizens at the grassroots, particularly around unglamorous but necessary themes, such as parking, housing, and municipal inattention. It's easy to go to conferences or "to the barricades," Panfilova argued, but it didn't help Russian citizens who are marginalized. The creation of yet another NGO front organization, as promised by Alekseeva and Saratov, would be greeted cynically, Panfilova argued, as just another platform for outsized egos and a launching pad for acquiring international grants. Panfilova said she planned to go public with her critique of civil society, if only to underscore to a broader audience that Russia's democratic growing pains could not solely be laid at the government's door.

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Anti-Corruption as Liberal Litmus Test

17. (SBU) Panfilova gave 50/50 odds on whether Medvedev would take Russia in a fundamentally more liberal direction, commenting that it was hard to predict "what will happen in the mind of a 42-year old man," but noted that anti-corruption could become a key litmus test.

Medvedev could prove that he is a "real political leader" in the field of fighting corruption, playing off of widespread discontent over the levels of corruption and Putin's own admonishment that more needs to be done. Nobody needs more conferences, she noted, but rather a "war" should be declared. Panfilova said that she would look to see whether Medvedev backed up his campaign rhetoric on rule of law with real efforts to attack corruption. A possible first test would be the quality and scope of the implementing legislation for Russia's adoption of Council of Europe and UN conventions against corruption, which has been under review for the last year. Making anti-corruption efforts systematic and permanent would require Medvedev to break ranks with some in the political establishment and be a test of political self-confidence. As to Medvedev's own vulnerability, Panfilova noted only that "everyone with a career in the public sector in the 1990's has a skeleton in the closet," but that Medvedev's transgressions appeared minor.

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